

KNOW THE RULES....

FOR CHILD SAFETY IN YOUTH SPORTS



More than 41 million children in the United States play in an organized youth sports program.¹ The benefits of these athletic activities are many and varied. For instance children can learn about discipline, responsibility, respect, and good sportsmanship. They can also develop self-confidence and a positive self-image, while learning new skills.

What can parents and guardians do to protect their children and assure both their children and themselves that the experience remains positive and productive? First and foremost, parents and guardians should have expectations about the coach and program. Parents and guardians have expectations that when their children go to school the teacher will have the training and expertise needed to teach their children and the school will have the standards and guidelines in place to run efficiently and effectively. There is a tendency to lower the expectations for sporting activities in which the coach is a volunteer and may be a fellow parent, guardian, or neighbor. Good intentions and a willingness to spend time with children just aren't enough when you're talking about the safety and well-being of children.

Parents and guardians need to understand that most of the people who volunteer as coaches truly care about children and mean them no harm. The risk comes in the small percentage of volunteers who see the coaching experience as an opportunity to gain access to children for the purpose of exploiting them. Couple that with the trust, respect, and authority the word "coach" implies, and you've got a potentially exploitive combination if the coach chooses to betray that relationship with the child. Children may also be reluctant to discuss their feelings with their parents or guardians, especially if they've been taught not to be a "tattletale" and to respect adult authority.

The questions and answers noted below offer guidelines by which parents and guardians can assess their children's sporting activities, including the coach, and help ensure their children's safety and fun in the sport.

- ★ Does the sports or youth-serving organization do a background check on coaches? This should include a fingerprint/criminal-history check (both state and federal), a check of sex-offender registries, and reference checks. Parents and guardians should inquire whether the club or organization has a harassment/abuse policy and whether the coach is certified or a member of a coaching association that has an ethics or conduct code.

- ★ What is the coach's philosophy about winning and sportsmanship? Children should be given the opportunity to have fun while playing the sport, and emphasis should be placed on individual accomplishments. Children should be praised for playing fairly and trying their best. Parents and guardians should be wary of a coach who advocates winning at any cost.



★ Are there other adults who supervise off-site travel? If the coach plays favorites with gifts and treats, or uses his or her authority to be alone with children, that should raise a red flag with parents and guardians. The coach should not be alone with children during team sleepovers or trips. You as a parent or guardian should know the other adults who supervise or have access to your children.

★ Do children use a locker room to dress, and are there multiple adults present in the locker room when children are using it? If the children are of the opposite sex, there needs to be at least two adult supervisors of that sex present. Locker rooms should not be closed to parents or guardians, and children should be afforded privacy but still be supervised by responsible adults.

★ Do you as a parent or guardian have input into the sporting activity? Parents and guardians should be kept informed through such things as meetings and newsletters. You should be given the opportunity to offer suggestions, particularly about developmental issues. You should be concerned if your children's practices are closed or private. Parents and guardians who are involved and attend their children's sporting events not only show support for their children but also have the opportunity to monitor the coach and the coach's interaction with children. If there is something troubling you as a parent or guardian, you should first talk to the coach about it. If you are still concerned, discuss your concern with the organization's management or administration.

★ Does the coach promise to make your child a champion player or want to spend time alone with your child outside of scheduled team activities or events? Parents and guardians should be cautious of such promises or private meetings, because they may be a smoke screen to win the family's trust or gain inappropriate access to the child. Once this trust is obtained, the coach then believes he or she will have unlimited access to your child. Single parents or guardians should also be careful about a coach who appears to want to "take the place" of the "absent parent."

★ Do you as a parent or guardian talk to your child about how he or she likes the coach or sport? Parents and guardians should always listen carefully to their children. If your child says he or she doesn't "like" the coach or want to play the sport anymore, it may be a signal of something more serious than a personality conflict or loss of interest in the sport. As a parent or guardian you should encourage your children to express their feelings and keep the lines of communication open. You should be able to speak to your children about personal-safety issues and reinforce safety rules with your children. Children should be taught it is okay to say "no" to an adult who makes them feel scared, uncomfortable, or confused, and parents and guardians should reassure their children it's okay to tell them if anything happens to make them feel that way.

¹ Sally Cunningham, National Council of Youth Sports, personal communication, May 20, 2005.

1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)

www.missingkids.com

Copyright © 2000 and 2005 National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. All rights reserved.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2005-MC-CX-K024 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® and 1-800-THE-LOST® are registered service marks of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

